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After Brecht: The Implicit Alienation of Annie Baker's Micro-naturalism in *The Flick*

Annie Baker's critically acclaimed play, *The Flick*, was the recipient of the prestigious 2013 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, an Obie Award for Playwriting, and the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Drama ("The Flick"). Baker's play focuses on three social outcasts working in a faltering single-screen movie theater in central Massachusetts—one of the last to possess and implement a 35-millimeter film projector. The story spans a single summer where crushes are developed, insecurities are revealed, and traditional film projection is defended as the digital dominates the national film market.

Baker's three-hour play is non-traditional in its storytelling in that the characters often take precedence over plot. In this respect, *The Flick* is Chekhovian in its dramatic action; a climactic storyline plays a secondary role to character musings and existential ponderings. Don Auction of *The Boston Globe* labeled the play "an idiosyncratic original"; David Cote of *TimeOut New York* called it a "hypnotic, heartbreaking micro-epic." These critics highlight the original, sometimes seemingly languorous, yet understated storytelling that Baker crafts.

In service of a muted examination of the human condition, Baker's scenes unfold in real-time. Embedded in the text's stage directions are many calls for pauses in dialogue, which, on stage, are anything but static. "I'm just trying to accurately portray the people who live in the movie theater inside my head," she said. "And I guess there's a lot of moments of not-talking. [...] All the walking and sweeping and mopping and dustpan-banging—there's a whole

symphony that [director] Sam [Gold] and the actors orchestrated...But I wouldn't call that silence" (Healy).

What resulted, according to Charles Isherwood of *The New York Times*, is wholly mimetic acting—performances that present human beings on stage as they actually behave. The stage activity, in its mimetic reality, took up nearly a full hour of the play's running time (by Isherwood's estimate) in its original Off-Broadway production at Playwrights Horizons in New York City. Though he called it "challengingly long," Isherwood echoed the majority of critics in listing the play's merits. Calling Baker a "peerless" and "gifted writer," Isherwood highlighted *The Flick*'s impact, writing, "This lovingly observed play will sink deep into your consciousness, and probably stay there for a while" ("At This Movie House").

However, audiences did not necessarily agree. *The Flick*'s original Off-Broadway run was momentous in that it "infuriated" some audience members. According to *The New York Times*, nearly a tenth of the audience left the play at intermission during its first week of performances, and subscribers openly threatened cancellations (Healy). Their main contentions were the play's three-hour running time and its slow, naturalistic pace (Isherwood, "Didn't Like Our Play?"). Given that continued season subscriptions are integral to the operation of a non-profit theatre company, this vocal response was understandably concerning (London). According to Isherwood, in an unprecedented move for the company, Artistic Director Tim Sanford e-mailed a detailed apology to the 3000 subscribers who had already seen the play. Sanford reportedly did not consult Gold or Baker before sending the e-mail to the organization's subscribers. His apology was largely denounced by the media and, most importantly (as Playwrights Horizons' mission is to serve the playwright first and foremost), Baker was allegedly "upset and felt blindsided" (Horwitz).

Sanford's e-mail read:

The Flick has stirred up so many emotions, both positive and negative, in audiences that I thought I would reach out to all of you and share my thoughts about it. I have to admit I was not totally prepared for it to be such a polarizing show. [...] Of course I had some trepidation about its length. [...] When performances began and some of you walked out at intermission, emphatically expressing your displeasure to our House Manager, we had lengthy discussions about what to do. Could we make internal cuts within the scenes or could whole scenes go? Were there places to pick up the pace? [...] But after our initial concern about walkouts, we began to pay attention to the other voices, the voices that urged Annie and Sam not to cut a second, the voices imbued with rapture for a theater experience unlike any they had experienced and for a production that stayed with them for days, even weeks afterwards. And it became clear to me that every moment of the play and production was steeped in purpose. Annie had a vision and this production beautifully executes that vision. And at the end of the day, we are a writer's theater and my first responsibility is to that writer. (Sanford)

Though, according to Horwitz, Sanford's public response was not well calculated, it underscored *The Flick*'s curious power to enrage its audience. During a January 2016 Off-Broadway performance of the revival of the Playwrights Horizons production at The Barrow Street Theater, an audience member literally called for Baker's death, shouting, "Booooo! Kill the playwright!" as the lights went down at the end of the first act (Warnock). The supposedly challenging nature of *The Flick* has even prompted the axing of an entire professional production. In March 2016, the Board and producers of Columbus, Ohio's Short North Stage

quietly canceled its May production of the play “for various reasons” (Carignan). Though never explicitly stated by the company, it can be assumed that the well-publicized contentious nature of the script was a factor in the decision.

Given the play’s utterly inoffensive content, its critical praise, and prestigious accolades, the much-documented audience outcry in response is puzzling and counterintuitive. Examining the type of naturalism that Baker employs in her writing, theatrical matrices, and audience expectation, this paper posits that in the contemporary American theatrical landscape, *The Flick* is implicitly alienating, and that some audience members may not yet be ready to endeavor on the resolution of the cognitive dissonance the play subliminally generates.

Audience Expectation

Micro-naturalism

The language of Annie Baker and some of her contemporaries (e.g., Amy Herzog, *The Civilians*, *The Nature Theater of Oklahoma*) was recently the subject of a *New York Times* piece that catalogued the presence of mimetic language in contemporary theatre. This “halting, admittedly unbeautiful way average men and women communicate” has only recently surfaced on American stages. Isherwood wrote, “The language we trill onstage is often a more literate or stylized expression of human speech, whether it’s the filigreed lyricism of Tennessee Williams’ characters, the eloquent dialectics that perfume Shavian drawing rooms or the staccato fireworks with which men flay one another in the best of David Mamet” (“The Rough Beauty”).

In December 2015, Isherwood coined this way of onstage speaking as “micro-naturalism” (“The Best Theater”). Theater companies such as *The Civilians*, *The Tectonic Theater Project*, and *The Nature Theater of Oklahoma* achieve this mimetic manner of communication through verbatim transcription from interviews and recorded conversations. Baker (and Herzog),

however, is highly skilled at replicating the “tangential, minimally verbal (and often subverbal) manner in which people often communicate” (Isherwood, “The Rough Beauty”).

Baker is self-aware, purposefully crafting dialogue that aims to replicate everyday behavior on stage. In a 2011 interview with *Psychology Today* she said, “I love sentence fragments. I love how strange it is when you actually write down what we sound like when we’re talking. It’s clumsy, elliptical poetry” (Flora). The economy of words with which her characters speak, the overlapping dialogue, the fragmentary sentences, and the sometimes seemingly never-ending silences littered throughout conversation are not only perfectly mimetic, but also deeply evocative of the way human beings skillfully avoid communicating their actual thoughts. The subtext is the star of Baker’s worlds.

As observed by Isherwood, Baker’s micro-naturalism is a departure from the dialogue of American realism. For example, from Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*:

BLANCHE: Now, then, let me look at you. But don’t you look at me, Stella, no, no, no, not till later, not till I’ve bathed and rested! And turn that over-light off! Turn that off! I won’t be looked at in this merciless glare! [*Stella laughs and complies*] Come back here now! Oh, my baby! Stella! Stella for Star! [*She embraces her again*] I thought you would never come back to this horrible place! What am I saying? I didn’t mean to say that. I meant to be nice about it and say— Oh, what a convenient location and such—Ha-a-ha! Precious lamb! You haven’t said a *word* to me.

STELLA: You haven’t given me a chance to, honey! [*She laughs, but her glance at Blanche is a little envious.*]

BLANCHE: Well, now you talk. Open your pretty mouth and talk while I look around for some liquor! I know you must have some liquor on the place! Where could it be, I wonder? Oh, I spy, I spy!

[She rushes to the closet and removes the bottle; she is shaking all over and panting for breath as she tries to laugh. The bottle nearly slips from her grip.]

STELLA *[noticing]*: Blanche, you sit down and let me pour the drinks. I don't know what we've got to mix with. Maybe a coke's in the icebox. Look'n see, honey, while I'm—

BLANCHE: No coke, honey, not with my nerves tonight! Where—where—where is—? (Williams 11)

Even taking into account Blanche's performativity, Williams' dialogue is still incredibly verbose. His characters speak in a more heightened, lyrical form of American English—a way of speaking that is at times almost novelistic with its reliance on metaphor and imagery. As compared to Williams', Baker's dialogue in *The Flick* is strikingly spare:

AVERY: Yeah.

Okay.

Fine.

(Pause.)

ROSE: Wait, what does /that—

AVERY. It's fine.

I'll take—I'll do whatever.

It's cool.

Sorry.

I didn't mean to like...

I didn't mean to freak you guys out.

Or be judgmental.

(pause)

Sorry. Yeah.

I'm okay with it.

(They stare at him.)

(He laughs nervously.)

AVERY: Seriously!!

I'm fine.

Sorry.

(ROSE and SAM exchange a long look. Then:)

ROSE: ...All right, boys.

I'm gonna go take a nap in the booth.

Wake me up at five till.

(She leaves. SAM looks at AVERY. AVERY finally stands up. They resume sweeping. After a little while:)

SAM: Richard Pryor and Angelina Jolie.

(Blackout.) (Baker 27)

Both of the excerpts above span a single page in their respective publications, yet Baker employs less than half of the amount of words (including stage directions) as Williams does. It's important to note, too, that with the pauses and physical actions that Baker wrote into her script, the single page excerpted above would also span a longer time onstage than Blanche and Stella's

interaction. As Isherwood observed, Williams was not alone in employing non-mimetic language in his plays—Mamet, Albee, and even Chekhov also heighten their characters' speaking.

Contemporary American audiences have been conditioned by these playwrights to expect a more stylized—and unnatural—version of speech on stage. So, the micro-naturalistic and imitative speech in *The Flick* may seem strange to the American theatergoer. Mimesis is expected in certain medias (e.g., film, television), but as the dialogue of dominating 20th century American realism demonstrates, it has been largely unexplored in mainstream American theatre until the past few years. Taking this unfamiliarity into account, one can begin to understand how even the “seasoned” theatergoers of Playwrights Horizons reacted so vehemently to the micro-naturalism of *The Flick*.

Matrixed Performance

An important aspect of Baker's theatrical mimesis in *The Flick* is its defiance of matrices. In “The New Theatre,” Michael Kirby delineated matrixed and non-matrixed performance. According to Kirby, the actor operates within person-place matrices—that is, the actor assumes an imagined character within an imagined environment. A musician, however, is non-matrixed in that she pretends to be no one other than herself and does not function within a place other than the performance hall, which encompasses the audience. Furthermore, matrix can be externally imposed on any body. Kirby wrote, “The context of place, for example, as determined by the physical setting and the information provided verbally and visually by the production, is frequently so strong that it makes an ‘actor’ out of any person, such as an extra, who walks up on the stage” (26).

Within a theater, the audience unconsciously distances the world on stage from the everyday. Simply by being in attendance at a play, where there is an expectation for actors to

play out a story on a stage, each audience member places the individuals onstage within person-place matrices. Thus, the character remains within the imagined reality and removed from the actor, who is part of the audience's ontology even after the play concludes. The delivery of matrixed performance is reinforced by the majority of contemporary American theatrical production—simply put, the audience is consistently aware, consciously or not, that actor and character are separate entities.

To further examine the complicated role matrices play in audience expectation, it is important to consider the dominant trend of mimetic set design. In a recent survey of American playwrights, the Theatre Development Fund noted that to meet subscribers' expectations, American regional theatres overwhelmingly produce realistic plays. "Theatres, many playwrights believe, manifest their conservatism by shunning work that is unusual, nonrealistic, or that plays with form in ways that complicate the narrative" (London 13). To serve the needs of these plays, the majority of theatrical worlds on American stages are meticulously curated to replicate living environments as they actually appear in the everyday. For example, in a 2010 production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the Guthrie Theatre, Set Designer Todd Rosenthal and Scenic Artist Aaron Sheckler not only employed appropriately-period furniture and appliances, but also detailed the wallpaper of their set with stains to increase its imitative qualities (see fig. 1). However, as explored earlier, the language of the play lacks mimesis, therefore reinforcing for the audience the matrices within which the actors are operating. As realistic plays have dominated the American theatrical market, it can be deduced that audiences are accustomed to seeing mimetic set design within the context of matrixed performance.

[Figure 1.]

So, when, upon entering the theater, an audience sees a realistic set like the one designed by David Zinn for the premiere run of *The Flick* at Playwrights Horizons, matrixed performance is expected (see fig. 2). Zinn's set is a hyper-realistic, wholly mimetic depiction of what a single-screen movie theater in Massachusetts looks like, down to the water stains on the ceiling's insulation boards. The audience, conditioned by imitative set design within realistic plays, is not prepared for the presence of micro-naturalistic dialogue or behavior. American audiences are not used to seeing people take the full amount of time it takes to sweep a stage, or to see a character pause to think of the next thing to say, or to see awkward silences played out on stage as they actually happen in everyday life; they are used to a heightened, matrixed (imagined) reality. As observed by Isherwood, "'The Flick' draws out nakedly truthful and unadorned acting" ("At This Movie House"). The mimetic acting that results from Baker's micro-naturalistic text is perceived as non-matrixed—that is, the delineation of character and actor is blurred, alienating the theatergoer accustomed to matrixed theatrical storytelling.

[Figure 2.]

Bertolt Brecht and Annie Baker

Given the audience response at Playwrights Horizons during the first week of previews, it is evident that *The Flick* is alienating. After all, according to Bertolt Brecht, "the artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience." The subscribers' demands for refunds or threats to cancel season subscriptions, or the shouting of a death wish for the playwright are indicative of *The Flick*'s distancing effects. Considering the expectations of matrixed performance that audiences bring with them into the theater, it is not surprising that the micro-naturalism of Baker's world is unnerving to some.

Brecht, responding to the realists of the early 20th century with his Epic Theater, worked to turn his spectators into observers. Denouncing the experiential, sensationally centered Dramatic Theatre, which, in his view, left the spectator “unalterable,” Brecht created a singular aesthetic—centered on alienation effects—that distanced the spectator from emotional empathy and instead turned him into an objective observer, arousing “his capacity for action” and forcing “him to take decisions” (Brecht 37).

Alienation effects that Brecht implemented to distance the spectator included choral music, direct address, and placards titling scenes. These non-realistic devices served to actively disrupt the imagined, matrixed reality accepted by the audience. Similarly, Brecht’s actors distanced their audiences by defying expectations. Brecht wrote, “the achievement of an A-effect absolutely depends on the lightness and naturalness of performance.” Heavily influenced by his observations of Chinese acting, Brecht incorporated non-naturalistic and highly presentational acting in juxtaposition with realistic performance to achieve audience alienation (91-93).

This paper argues that Baker’s micro-naturalism functions in an identical manner. Brecht’s devices, including non-naturalistic acting, have seeped their way into the American theatrical landscape since the second half of the 20th century. Therefore, audiences have been conditioned to a point where the defiance of realistic acting isn’t necessarily surprising. Such performance is, in fact, expected within the realm of Brechtian theatre, which is understandably aesthetically different from American realism. So, when an audience enters a theater and sees a non-mimetic set design, alienation and non-naturalism is to be expected (see fig. 3). However, when a mimetic set design, such as Zinn’s design for *The Flick*, is encountered, an audience expects realistic (yet matrixed) acting. As discussed, Baker’s micro-naturalism disrupts this expectation, thus creating an alienation effect. Many theatregoers, it seems, are not prepared to

experience the cognitive dissonance that arises from alienation in mainstream contemporary American theatre, so rather than working to critically resolve the dissonance as Brecht would have wanted, they flee the auditorium and complain to the House Manager.

[Figure. 3. Scenic Design by R. Finkelstein for The University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music's production of *Threepenny Opera*]

Implications

In *The Flick*, Baker creates an entirely believable environment in which to tell her story. Her micro-naturalistic dialogue creates a mimetic world that challenges the audience's expectation of matrixed performance. Because of American theatrical tradition, this form of alienation paradoxically distances the spectator from the action on stage (after all, Baker's characters and the audience are representative of one another). This paper vitally furthers and broadens Brecht's landmark theatrical theory, expanding its scope to reflect the developing contemporary theatrical landscape.

Uniquely, Baker alienates within the Dramatic Theatre and, in the process, is subliminally revolutionizing theatrical realism. The critical praise to the initial run of *The Flick* Off-Broadway, as well as the multiple awards the play has garnered—most notably the Pulitzer Prize for Drama—demonstrate artistic and scholarly value attributed to her work. Though some audience members may not yet be accustomed to Baker's style of storytelling, the continued implementation of micro-naturalism not only in her work, but in the work of some of her contemporaries as well, signifies an unprecedented evolution of dramatic form.

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Figures



Fig 1. Scenic Art; *Aaron Sheckler Designs*; Web.



Fig 2. Portfolio; *David Zinn: design for theater*; Web.



Fig 3. Threepenny Opera; *Stage Designs of Richard Finkelstein*; Web.